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THE REINDEER STORY

The reindeer industry in Canada was started in March, 1935, with a herd of 2,370 animals herded from Alaska for the express purpose of giving the native peoples of the far north a new source of livelihood.

In 1922, a report was made by a Royal Commission which had been set up to study the possibilities of raising reindeer and musk-oxen. The Commission made recommendations that led, in 1929, to the purchase of a herd of reindeer from Alaska after much investigation to find the best range for the experiment.

Arrangements were made with an Alaskan reindeer company to deliver a herd of 3,000 reindeer to a range near the mouth of the Mackenzie River. The drive from Alaska began in December 1929. A.E. Porsild assisted in the selection of the reindeer for this purpose. The drive was in charge of the late Andrew Bahr, veteran Lapp reindeer herder, who was assisted by other Lapps and several Eskimos. Many difficulties were encountered and many problems arose pertaining to communication and supply in crossing the mountains of northern Alaska and the bleak coastal plain to the Mackenzie Delta. Some of the reindeer broke away and returned to their home range. Blizzards, intense cold, straying, accidents, and the depredations of wolves delayed progress. Heavy losses to the herd was sustained but were recouped to a large extent by the fawn crop each year. The reindeer arrived in Canadian territory in 1933, but completion of the trek was delayed by the unusual difficulties of moving the herd to the east side of the Mackenzie Delta. A herd of 2,370 animals was finally delivered on March 6, 1935.

Preparations for the reception of the reindeer were made at Kittigazuit on the Arctic Coast and there a corral was built. In 1931, three Laplanders and their families were brought from Norway to train the Canadian Eskimos in the handling of herds. In 1933, the Reindeer Protection Ordinance was enacted and an area of 6,600 square miles on the east side of the Mackenzie Delta was reserved. Buildings were erected for the station staff and equipment. In 1952, the reserve was enlarged to 17,900 square miles.

The reindeer staff now has a nucleus of Canadians and Laplanders. Young Eskimos are employed as apprentice herders. Some have remained fairly constantly on the job and have become good herders but most of the nomadic peoples of the Far North prefer to hunt and trap for a living. They do not enjoy a life of set routine.

The Reindeer Station employs 12 Eskimos, while the Eskimo owner of the second herd has four Eskimo helpers.

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The training of the more interested young Eskimos includes checking and counting at the summer roundups, the transfer of herds to essential ranges, the slaughter of animals, and the handling of meat and skins. They also are given instructions on predators, insect pests, and day-by-day herd control.

Reindeer are supplied to trained Eskimos, and help is given in setting up herding units in places apart from the main herd. When the new herd increases in size under protection, some animals are turned back to the main herd and the remainder become the property of the herd managers.

The Reindeer Grazing Reserve extends from the Mackenzie River Delta eastward along the Arctic Coast to Liverpool Bay and encompasses the Eskimo Lakes. There are two herds on the Reserve. One of these, known as native herd No. 4, is managed by Eskimos under the guidance of the superintendent of the Reindeer Range Station and his staff. The other herd, known as the main herd, is operated by the Government and serves as a means of training young Eskimos in proper herding practices. It also serves as a nucleus from which new herds can be established under the management of qualified Eskimo herders.

There are two herds today, with some 4500 animals in the main herd and about 1700 in the native herd.

Since the industry was established in 1935, more than 11,000 reindeer have been slaughtered for meat and skins. Most of the meat has either been sold through the Hudson's Bay Company post at Aklavik or has been bought by the local missions for their schools and hospitals. Many of the skins have been distributed to Eskimos in the Eastern Arctic to take the place of caribou skins now in short supply.

Experience has shown that reindeer herds cannot be successfully maintained without protection. Losses caused by predators and straying become serious when herds are not guarded.

In the autumn, the reindeer move to winter ranges, some 50 miles inland from the coast, where reindeer moss, a lichen which forms their winter diet, is abundant. On completion of the spring fawning seasons, the herds move towards the coast to get relief from insects during the hot weather.

The superintendent of the station supervises the field work, directs his crew, and maintains the buildings and equipment. Qualified observers visit the station periodically and scientists make their reports. The reindeer have adapted themselves to conditions of life in Canada and no effort has been spared by the administration to make this possible. Although the original herd of 2,370 reindeer has nearly tripled even after the slaughter of several thousand animals over the years, the original purpose of establishing a self-sustained Eskimo industry has not been achieved.

There are several reasons for this. One of them is that the Eskimos prefer the gregarious life of their camps to the lonely existence of a herder. Another is that the attractive wages paid in other work in which Eskimos are

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being employed draw off many of the more capable individuals who would normally be expected to take the lead in starting new herds.

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